

CHRISTMASING WITH YOU

BY WILLIAM NEALE

EXCERPT

“Unless you go out and look for reasons to be happy again, you never will be,” Mike said to Drew via their Skype teleconference. “And we’re going to toast the fact that you’re alive and healthy, you’re the smartest, kindest person I know, and most important, you’re the brother I never had. Now go open the damn bottle of wine.”

Even though Mike now lived seven-hundred miles away in Atlanta, Drew walked away from the computer in his home office and found a chilled bottle of sauvignon blanc in his bar refrigerator. It had been there since Bill put it there. He found the corkscrew, opened the bottle, and reached for a wine glass from the bar shelf. Spotting a thick layer of dust as he held it to the light, he frowned at the fact that none of the bar stemware had been used—or washed—in months. He wiped the dust off this one with the tail of his shirt.

“Are you happy now?” Drew asked without enthusiasm, now returned to the conversation.

“Yes. Here’s to your thirty-sixth birthday, buddy,” Mike said and raised his glass in salute and took a sip of his own drink. “*And*, we’re going to make one more toast. Only this one is in lieu of a handshake. And you know what a promise and a handshake means to us, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then say it, Andrew Bastion. What does a promise and a handshake mean to us?”

“It means we swear upon our friendship that we will keep our promise,” he answered in the same flat tone.

“Between now and the exactly thirty days remaining before Christmas, I want you to promise me that you will get out of that big old depressing museum of a house and go find some ways to make other people happy. I want you to find the Christmas spirit. You do that and you will start living again.”

“No, Mike. I don’t feel up to seeing other people yet.”

“I’m not talking about dating them. I’m talking about you focusing on something other than your own sadness. You’re the most generous person I know. So find people who need your help and help them. They’re everywhere, Drew.

“I don’t know, Mike. I—”

“Listen to me. I know you better than you know yourself. This will accomplish what all the grief counseling obviously hasn’t. Will you promise me you’ll at least make an effort? Please, buddy, I worry so much about you.”

“I’ll be fine and you don’t need to worry about me. You have a new wife and two little step-kids to worry about now.”

“I’m allowed to worry about whoever I damn well please, asshole, so stop playing martyr and make me a promise that you’ll try.”

“Mike, this is my first Christmas without Bill. I don’t think I’m ready. I just want to stay here and be left alone so that I won’t forget a single thing about him.”

“Then remember how much he loved Christmas. Remember the enormous trees he always brought home that he knew were too big but he bought ‘em anyway. Remember how he loved throwing impromptu parties to decorate them and how he was always trying to get us all to sing carols with him.”

Drew couldn’t hold back a small smile. “Yeah, and bless his tone deaf heart—he could make every dog in the neighborhood start howling.”

Make laughed. “Yeah, you sure got that right. But it didn’t stop him from knowing every song by heart and loving everything about the season. What would he want you to do? What would Bill tell you to do about Christmas this year? You think he’d want you to be all alone and miserable?”

Drew let out a long breath knowing he’d lost this battle. “No... I guess he’d be yelling at me to get my ass out of this house. Okay ... I promise I’ll at least try.”

“That’s my bro. Now drink to it. See, you’re already making progress. I’m gonna check on you in a couple of days and I want to hear about more progress, okay?”

“Okay, Mike—whatever.”

“Drew, you know I’m riding you so hard because it’s time for you to be pushed back into living again. And it’s only because I love you. You know that.”

“Yeah, I do. I love you too. God, I wish you were still here.”

“I am, buddy. I’ll always be here for you.”

Drew sat alone on the sectional sofa in what he now thought of as his family-less room. He held the same hardly-touched glass of wine and stared at the logs burning in the fireplace. He hadn’t really wanted the wine or the fire and now both were too warm. But it indeed was his birthday on this November the twenty-fifth and he was at least trying to contemplate what he had just promised his best friend.

“Okay, Bill, I know—it’s time to get my act together and make the effort,” he said out loud. Talking to an absent Bill had become a frequent habit since his passing. Drew knew it suggested some mental issues but at the same time, it was comforting to indulge in the fantasy that on some other plane, Bill could hear every word he said. No one else knew Drew did this and, he figured, as long as he didn’t start really believing Bill was there, he’d eventually stop.

He got up from the sofa, dumped the warm glass of wine in the bar sink, and poured himself another. This time he dropped three ice cubes in it and chuckled when he remembered how Bill always did that and how Drew would scold him for ruining a perfectly good glass of white wine.

Drew walked to the antique mahogany armoire where the house's sound system equipment was hidden, opened the doors, and picked up the iPod Bill had connected to it. Bill had spent many hours building playlists of music for every occasion and took pride in making customized and fully loaded iPods as gifts for friends. There still were several of them in their unopened boxes on the armoire's bottom shelf. Drew scrolled through the different collections loaded on this one until he found the one he was looking for. It was labeled *A D&B Christmas*—their friends often referred to Drew and Bill collectively as D&B. There were dozens of albums and hundreds of holiday songs in this one collection alone.

“You really did love your Christmases, B,” Drew said softly. He scrolled to the album he was looking for and pushed *Play*.

Yes, it had been Bill's favorite Christmas album and Bill especially loved to play it while the two made their annual batches of Christmas cookies. Drew would wince and then faux complain every time Bill hit a high note about two notes flat. And now, he would give his soul to hear Bill singing it off-key just one more time.

It was actually pleasant hearing the first few songs and remembering so many holiday seasons they had spent together. But as soon as Karen Carpenter's dulcet voice began the next one, he knew he had made a big mistake.

*Merry Christmas, darling.
We're apart, that's true.
But I can dream and in my dreams
I'm Christmasing with you...*

*... I've just one wish on this Christmas Eve:
I wish I were with you.*

Drew put down the wine glass and buried his face in the softness of the tufted silk pillow beside him. His shoulders shook and chest heaved as he poured all his cumulative sadness and loneliness into the kind of crying breakdown he hadn't allowed himself for at least a month now. How could he have predicted that such a sweet and innocent little Christmas song by The Carpenters could trigger such a relapse?

With grim determination, Drew lifted himself up, wiped his eyes, and leaped more than walked to the sound system cabinet. Grabbing the iPod with one hand, he jerked it and the cable connecting it from the sound system. With a windup worthy of a baseball pitcher on the mound, he delivered a down-the-middle strike directly through the center pane of the leaded glass door leading to the sunroom.

“I'm so sorry, Bill,” he said to the empty room, tears streaking his face. “But it hurts more than I can stand. I will never play your music again.”

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